

*A Sermon preached by The Reverend Deborah Phillips
upon Mark Engelhardt's final Sunday as our Lay Associate*

Christmas I Year C

The Word

For the past few years, we have had an unrehearsed, “pickup,” Christmas pageant. Whoever wants to be in the pageant simply comes to church a little earlier, and picks out their costume. Then, during the service, they come forward after a little coaxing by the parents when the portion of the Christmas story is read that includes their part. I love this idea for a number of reasons: visiting children get to participate, there is no stress about rehearsals and no one has any lines to memorize. But, there is one very selfish reason I love this idea. Right before the service, up in Abbot Hall, the children all gather around and I get to tell them the Christmas story by myself, the story they will all embody. As I begin by telling them about the visit of the beautiful and awesome angel Gabriel to the young girl Mary, and I watch their eyes grow big, the story begins to grow large in my heart as well. When I talk about wonderful Joseph, protector of this blessed child and mother, I feel God’s loving arms wrapped about me. As I mention the shepherds who watched comets and meteors fly across the darkened sky I realize that simply using the words to describe this scene brings it alive in me. Although we all know this story by heart, the actual telling of it has a transforming effect that brings God closer to our hearts. The story of God, communicated through the Incarnation, is one whose power is in the telling.

I mention this today because our passage from the Gospel according to John speaks of Jesus being the Word of God. In the Greek, this word is “Logos.” To the ancient Greeks, “logos” was used to describe order and knowledge. As quoted from Wikipedia, it was “the divine animating principle pervading the universe.” It meant reason, speech, thought and language. As Logos, Jesus Christ is the self-revelation of God, the communication of God in flesh. Think of the stories we know of Jesus: Jesus at age 12, speaking in the Temple; Jesus describing the kingdom of God in analogies, the story telling parables which teach the merciful nature of God. Even in most of the healings and miracles, all Jesus does is speak, and people are made whole; water is turned to wine. God came to physically communicate to us the inexhaustible power of Divine Love. Before time began, before we were even created, God desired to be in relationship with God’s beloveds, expressing in human ways the divine initiative. So God made us, creatures with senses to whom this nature could be revealed, creatures who could enter into a loving relationship with God, a people who would deepen this relationship by hearing God speak through the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, the Word who witnessed the birth of creation, and then was born for us.

This is Mark Engelhardt’s last Sunday with us as our Lay Associate and Music Director. This is also Mark’s favorite time of year, for this story of angels, Mary, Joseph, shepherds and kings, speaks to the great devotion Mark has for God, God’s people and our tradition .

His name “Engelhardt” means something like hard angel.
I think steadfast is what they mean by hard, like hard and fast.
Mark certainly is a steadfast messenger of the Good News of the Word made flesh.
Whether communicating through e-mail and e-news, or through the music played and sung,
Mark has been bearing good tidings to us these many years.
He has comforted us when grieving and encouraged us when perplexed.
His very presence says, “Be not afraid; God is ever with you.”

Mark bears the Word of God in his heart.
It is not surprising that he has taught us so many versions of the Magnificat,
and gratefully written one as well, for magnifying the Lord is in his DNA.
Mark said yes to God a long time ago and has spent his entire life and his treasure trove of talents
faithfully sharing the Word of God, teaching us how to proclaim it with beauty and grace.
Music is his expression of love to the Word who saved humankind with the song of resurrection.

Mark, like Joseph, protects this Word.
The integrity of our worship and prayer is of great importance to him.
Throughout his career he has carefully tended to this own spirituality and mentored others in theirs.
Mark knows that Christ needs to take root and grow within our hearts and he has been faithful to its tender care.
He has been a minister to us all and a conservator of the tradition.

Like the shepherds, Mark has gone out into the world, both foreign and familiar,
to do the work God has given him to do.
With each new encounter, Mark shares his humble spirit; gently, quietly.
He speaks to us all of the glory of God and of God’s divine love.

Now Mark is going off, like the kings, to share what he has in honor of the holy Word.
It is quite appropriate that he begins his new adventure on Epiphany Sunday,
when the exquisite gifts of gold, incense and myrrh were given,
for we have been richly blessed by the gifts he offers.

Mark helps create a space where God may be revealed to us in as we gather in Christ’s name.
This space is created for power the liturgy to transform our lives.

For the embodied Word of God is most fully realized in our liturgy.
We hear God speak as scripture is read and the sacred hymns are sung.
We see the face of God in the community gathered.
We touch and taste this living Word when we receive communion.
The Word of God is most fully revealed in the liturgy of God’s church.
This is why this worship is so important.
This is why we commit to it each and every week.
For this is when the Word of God, which was before time, is made Incarnate today.

Do you know the word that is used for the action when I take the wafer from the paten
and place it in your hands?
The word for this act is “communicate.”
Christ is communicated when I give you the Holy Sacrament and you consume it.
The living God is communicated through the consumption of the Body and Blood of Christ.
Just as the Story of the birth of Christ comes alive in me right before the pageant,
it comes alive in each of us as we receive the bread and wine of communion.

May we give thanks to God for wanting to be made known to us,
for loving us so and sharing his Son to communicate this love.
May we all be faithful witnesses to God working in us
following the example of all the saints, as our souls magnify the Word.

Amen.